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PM Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the official opening of Singapore Management University law school building and the Kwa Geok Choo Law Library on 15 March 2017

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Speech by PM Lee Hsien Loong

<http://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-opening-smu-school-law-building>

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of the Singapore Management University (SMU); Professor Arnoud De Meyer, President of SMU; Professor Yeo Tiong Min, Dean of the School of Law; Chief Justice, ladies and gentlemen.

A very good morning to all of you. I am very happy to be here today to join you, to open the new SMU law school building and the Kwa Geok Choo Law Library.

My mother, Kwa Geok Choo was a conveyancing lawyer for more than 30 years. She accepted many pupils. Nowadays you call them Trainees who have Supervising Solicitors. But in those days, you have Pupil Masters and Pupils, even if the Master is a lady. My mother took a close interest in all of them as their Pupil Master. She was a good and patient mentor. She allowed her pupils to shadow her, follow her to every meeting, and listen in on phone calls to clients. After each client meeting, she would explain to them patiently and privately why she had advised the client in that way. Now quite a few of her former pupils are themselves senior lawyers, and still remember her fondly. My mother paid special attention to the female lawyers in the firm. She encouraged them to find husbands, get married, and then have as many children as possible. In that order. She was ahead of the Government in paying attention to work-life balance. In the early 1980s, when the five-and-a-half day work week was the norm, she declared a five-day week for all married female lawyers in her firm. She said it was to enable them to take the Saturday off to do marketing and take care of the family, because she believed a happy family was a priority for all working mums.

So after my mother passed away in 2010, it was natural to remember her through her profession. When SMU suggested building a law library and dedicating it in her name, her family was very happy to agree. In her office at the law firm, she had a small personal library of law books. Her constant companion was a dog-eared green hard cover book brought back from her student days in Cambridge. It was “Law of Property in Land”, by Henry Gibson Rivington, which was then the leading authority in land law. I do not know if anybody still uses it today. On her desk, was a copy of the Estate Duty Act – in those days we had Estate Duty in Singapore – to help her to advise clients to structure trusts and wills to meet multi-generational needs. She also had a complete set of all the Ordinances, nowadays we call them Statutes, so she could keep abreast of new legislation. In those days, there was no such thing as Statutes Online, and you had to pay for your copies. She flagged the relevant pages with bookmarks that she had made herself, out of old Christmas cards – these were ancient times, before post-its and sticky notes existed. When any amendments were passed, the amendment bills would come by snail mail from the Singapore National Printers, and she would literally “cut and paste” them into her set – get the snippets out and paste onto the relevant pages of the Ordinances. I once asked her for one legislation, the

Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Act, because I was then in the SAF and needed to prepare for promotion examination. She got me one, with the pages pasted and updated just as she did for the rest of her legislation. Luckily, I passed my promotion examination. My mother would have been proud to have a law library named after her.

When the project started, SMU showed me the initial sketches for the buildings. Maybe because I am not an architect, I could not quite visualise from them what the actual built structures would be like. Ho Kwon Ping offered to come and explain to me. I said I have full confidence; go ahead and build. Now that the buildings are completed, I am very happy with the result. You chose a good site on the slopes of Fort Canning Hill, overlooking Stamford Green, and it is near the old National Library site. I saw the library completed for the first time one night, from Fort Canning Park where I was having a walk. The lit dome glowed like a jewel in the dark. The architects had done a brilliant job. So this morning before coming, I posted a picture of it at night, looking splendid and said, “Guess where?”. A lot of people guessed where, I presume because some of my fans must be SMU students. But one of them said, “Welcome to Teh Bing land”. I did not quite understand what this meant, but when I arrived here this morning, all became clear to me because your Chairman told me the history of this. I am very glad to be here and happy that the “Teh Bing” has been cleared away. I am also glad that the Kwa Geok Choo Library Endowment Fund, which supported the building of the library, has funded scholarships for undergraduate and post-graduate students, and also awards for top law students at SMU.

On behalf of Mdm Kwa Geok Choo’s family, I would like to thank all those who have been involved in the Endowment, who have raised funds, overseen the project, and brought it to fruition.

I am also happy that the SMU School of Law now has new buildings. The SMU School of Law admitted its first students almost ten years ago, in August 2007. It was Singapore’s second law school. Our aim was not just to produce more law graduates. We wanted a law school that would provide a rigorous legal education, coupled with exposure to other disciplines, like business, economics, accountancy, social sciences or information systems. We hoped that the graduates would be more versatile, able to apply their knowledge of the law in many different fields, and to contribute to our economy and society. I am happy that SMU School of Law has established itself in such a short time, distinguished itself, and carved its own niche. You now have six batches of graduates, your students have distinguished themselves internationally – you have won the International Criminal Court Moot for the last two years, and your graduates are in demand – they hold their own in competition with graduates of other more established law schools, both local and abroad, and are making their mark in the profession. I hope that with these new facilities, you will do even better in the future.

Like other sectors of the economy, the law profession is changing and being disrupted, we need to keep pace with the changes. Technology is automating many routine legal tasks, like drafting straightforward contracts and conveyancing documents. International law firms are already using data science for discovery work, to analyse voluminous registries, and to answer legal questions. This will change the way law is practised, and lawyers will need different skills to add value. Our law schools will have to keep their curricula up-to-date, both undergraduate as well as continuing education, to produce lawyers who are prepared for the demands of the new working

environment.

The Government is supporting our legal profession to adapt to these changes. It is supporting bigger law firms to venture into new areas of legal practice. It is helping smaller law firms to strengthen their capabilities, raise their productivity, and enhance their services to clients. For example, the Ministry of Law together with the Law Society and SPRING recently launched “Tech Start for Law”, to help Singapore law firms adopt new technologies, meet the high standards of efficiency, reliability and service that our judicial system demands. We are also encouraging law students to pursue cross-disciplinary learning and collaboration, in order to acquire skills that are relevant for a new world.

At the same time, we are creating opportunities for Singapore firms and lawyers. We have built an international reputation as a good place for doing business. We have a clean system, we uphold the rule of law, and the administration of justice is efficient and fair. Asia is prospering – China, India, Southeast Asia. Companies all around the region are looking for venues where they can resolve their disputes, through arbitration, litigation or mediation. Singapore is the natural choice. We are working to become the debt restructuring hub in Asia. We are already one of the top five seats of arbitration in the world. Our institutions – the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC), the Singapore International Commercial Court (SICC) and the Singapore International Mediation Centre (SIMC) – provide a full menu of dispute resolution options. They are well regarded with great growth potential. For example, the SIAC, under Mr Lucien Wong’s chairmanship, before he became Attorney-General, handled a record of 343 cases last year, more than a 50% increase over 2014.

At the same time, we are helping Singapore law firms with their growth and regionalisation efforts. I visited Myanmar last year and was very glad to meet some young Singapore lawyers there, women as well as men. They were working for our law firms who have set up offices in Myanmar. They told me they relished the challenge and the experience had opened their eyes to the opportunities out there.

Singapore lawyers have many bright prospects to look forward to. I hope that this new law building and library will enrich campus life for the students, the faculty and SMU as a whole, and will inspire faculty and students to explore and to achieve. May you, through the teaching and practice of the law, produce many graduates who will contribute to our economy and society, make a difference to Singapore, and improve the lives of Singaporeans.

Congratulations, and thank you very much.